

January 1999

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Recommended Citation

Van Hoeck, Melanie (1999) "Land of Make-Believe," *Ethos*: Vol. 1999 , Article 5.
Available at: <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos/vol1999/iss1/5>

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Believe

Land of make-believe

BY MELANIE VAN HOECK



PHOTOS BY AARON BARSTOW

The sun shines brightly, scattering its rays across a field sprinkled with wildflowers. A slight breeze touches the grass as a motley audience begins to assemble. It is the perfect day for a tournament. The field is ready, the onlookers are gathered. Only the fighters are missing. The air crackles with anticipation, as two young Irish girls dressed in flowing linen gowns whisper and giggle.

A group of monks stands solemnly, black

wool cloaks billowing. They are trying to avert their eyes as a belly dancer in dazzling silk gyrates nearby.

A Persian woman in gilded blue glides past, as the tiny bells lining her garments send a melodic jingle into the air.

All eyes are on the clearing—and suddenly, over the top of the hill, two fighters appear. The crowd cheers as the fighters take the field, majestic and knightly, the sun glinting off their helmets.

Pieces of sturdy armor and shining chain mail cover elbows, knees, legs, hands, chests



**"I'm the
regional
fire-breather.
I breathe fire
and eat fire,"**

Sarah Kerschenske said.

She is shown here
wearing the standard
dress of central European
upper-class women in
the early 1200s.

and all vital body parts.

Each fighter carries a shield, brilliantly colored and adorned with his coat of arms. Rattan sticks in hand, they face one another with a chivalrous bow.

Battles like this were fought regularly in the Middle Ages in kingdoms with beautifully dressed nobles eagerly looking on. But what about in the 1990s, in places like Ames, Iowa, before an audience of fellow students and townspeople?

Halloween has come and gone, and Iowa State students have stuffed their Superman costumes and Monica Lewinsky wigs in their closets. But a few students are keeping their dress-up clothes at hand.

For members of the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA) at ISU, the costume-wearing season extends far beyond October 31. Whether sporting real suits of armor, intricately embroidered gowns or simple tunics and tights, members of SCA strive year-round to re-create the Middle Ages in style.

The SCA is an international organization with a purpose to "recapture the ambiance of

the Middle Ages and the Renaissance through re-creating ... any facet of medieval life," according to an SCA brochure. There are more than 500 branches of the SCA in the "Known World," which encompasses the United States and nine other countries, including Australia and Japan.

Members do their best to make everything at an event "period," or authentic to the years between A.D. 600 and A.D. 1600. This includes not just apparel, but also weapons, armor, jewelry, food, art and music.

Jenny Wilson, senior in animal science and microbiology, is one of the chatelaines (new members' officers) for ISU's SCA branch, the Canton of Axed Root. Wilson joined SCA as a freshman after being intrigued by the club's booth at Clubfest.

"I like that period of history," Wilson said. She appreciated the way the SCA tries to bring back "the chivalry and the way people treated each other. And they got to wear cool clothes and do fun stuff. I guess I just like dressing up."

"Garb" (the SCA term for period clothing)

is required at all official SCA events, including weekend camp-outs, banquets and tournaments. "Costumes help to create this atmosphere," Wilson said. "It does happen at some of the longer [events]—you forget that there's an outside world."

Michelle Klinnert, junior in horticulture, agreed. "When you're at an event, it just seems like time has moved back. You can get so lost," she said.

Wilson also said donning garb can coax people out of their everyday routines and into the medieval mindset. "I know guys that are terribly shy, but you put them in a kilt, and suddenly they're your best friend," Wilson said. "It's a lot easier, when you're in a costume, to act different and bring out a different side of you."

In fact, SCA members do more than discover different sides of their personalities—in a way, they take on entirely new identities. Each SCA member is encouraged to create a persona, a character he or she will assume in SCA life. A persona can reach different levels of development, depending on a member's

Anachronism: Anything out of its proper time.

Authorized: Being formally recognized as trained to an adequate level of safety in a combat or combat-related activity.

Chatelaine: The officer in charge of greeting and helping newcomers. Also loans costumes and gear as needed.

Court: The word generally refers to a formal gathering of an SCA chapter, presided over by its ceremonial leaders. The primary activities of a court include announcements,

presentations and awards from the leaders to individuals in the group.

Crash Space: Informal lodging with members of the group holding an event. Many SCA

members regard anyone in the organization as a distant cousin and make floor space available for out-of-town visitors.

effort and level of interest.

Generally, a member begins by choosing a name, which must be researched for authenticity and registered with the national SCA office to ensure it is unique. The goal is to find a name that could have existed in the SCA's time period, but didn't—no Joan of Arcs or William the Conquerors allowed. The culture and time period of the name's origin determines the type of garb a member wears. Often, however, the name is not chosen first.

"A lot of people choose their personas based on the costumes they like," Wilson said. This is true for Roxanne Sweney, senior in nutritional science and biochemistry. New to the SCA this semester, she has not started researching her name but knows what kind of garb she wants. "I really like Turkish," Sweney said. "It's really comfortable. It involves big baggy pants, and it's also feminine."

Klinnert's persona has developed a bit further. Her SCA name is Margaret Julia Wallace ("no relation to William," she insisted). Margaret is the daughter of an Irish merchant in the year 1356.

Wilson's persona, Arnevaz Abi ShirZan, is even more elaborate. Arnevaz is a city dweller in the empire of Persia in the 1480s. Wilson is interested in sewing and has sewn at least six sets of authentic Persian garb, with different outfits for different occasions.

"The Persian court was equal to anything in Europe—it was grandeur all over the place," Wilson said. She chose a Persian persona partly because, when she was child, she and her family lived in Iran for one and a half years. Wilson's time there fostered a fascination with Iranian culture and provided her with many Persian items, some of which she is able to use in SCA activities.

All the hard work and research put into crafting a persona pay off in the end, according to Wilson. "The goal is to help separate your mundane life from your SCA life," Wilson said. "It makes it a little bit more real."

"Mundane" is the term used by SCA members to describe anything contemporary. And the contrast this term implies between the real world and the SCA world is decidedly intentional. Klinnert said SCA members

Jenny Wilson, a senior in microbiology and animal science, is the persona of Arnevaz Abi ShirZan. Her Persian outfit is like those worn by ladies of the court in the last half of the 14th century.



strive to keep a sharp distinction between the mundane and the SCA, especially at events.

"You're really trying to get a 'past shock,'" Klinnert said. "It just really wrecks the mood when you see somebody in jeans and a T-shirt."

Tammy Hartmann, also known as Mairin Mac an Fhilidh, is an Ames resident and Axed Root's seneschal, which is much like the chapter president of other organizations. Hartmann agrees the separation of SCA and mundane is a vital part of SCA's role in members' lives. "To me," Hartmann said, "'mundane' would be something that's everyday life. In everyday life, I'm a stay-at-home mom. [The SCA] gives me a chance to work

on other things that I find interesting. Most people pick a persona that is different from what they have to do every day—that's the fun part."

After SCA members have developed personas and are artfully attired in period garb, they are not simply dressed up with no place to go. There are many events where SCA members mingle, eat, teach, learn, sing, laugh and fight.

Fighting, the activity most commonly associated with the SCA by the mundane world, is usually done at tournaments. The SCA fighters tend to attract ample attention during Veishea, when they don their armor, grab their brightly colored shields and proceed

Event: An SCA gathering, usually with a special medieval or Renaissance theme. Events can be held indoors at a variety of sites, or at campgrounds.

Feast: An event at which the main activity is the consumption of an elaborate meal, often accompanied by entertainment.

Feast Gear: Tableware for one diner. Almost all SCA feasts assume the guests will bring everything they need to eat in comfort, including plates, bowls, goblets and utensils.

Garb: The medieval or Renaissance clothing worn at SCA events.

Gold Key: A collection of loaner garb and gear for the use of newcomers, generally maintained by the chatelaine.



Timothy Vaughan, a graduate of the University of Iowa, adopted the persona of Albrecht Von Salzburgr. The 16th century garb he wears was typical of central European noblemen. The dagging, or long sleeves, was a sign of wealth.

to beat, bludgeon and clobber one another with wooden swords.

Tim Knotts, junior in history, currently is serving as Axed Root's knights marshal, which is a cross between a referee and a personal trainer. Knotts, whose SCA name is Cilan Ap Rhys, said fighting is, ironically enough, a good way to build relationships in SCA.

"Fighters have a really close-knit community in the area," Knotts said. "You really get to know people when you're beating on them with sticks." It may sound dangerous, but Knotts said fighting is quite safe. The armor worn by fighters is protective and covers all major parts of the body, he said. Fighters also are well-trained before they are allowed to fight in official tournaments. The SCA national organization requires fighters to be "authorized" before they fight in competition.

Knotts, who is the only ISU student authorized to fight, said the authorization process begins with fighters learning basic techniques and rules of combat with a sword and shield. After a fighter has been fighting for a month or two, and the marshal deems him or her ready, the authorization test is given. The test is conducted in the presence of two marshals, while the hopeful fighter battles a third marshal.

The authorization is "mainly to make sure that you're safe on the battlefield, both to yourself and to the people that you're fighting," Knotts said. He said fighting in SCA is comparable to any other kind of athletic activity. "It's a lot of fun," he said. "It is very much a sport, and just like any other sport, there's a lot of competition, but there's also a lot of camaraderie."

Once fighters are authorized, plenty of chances arise for them to practice their skills. Some events, called wars, are organized primarily for fighting and can last up to two weeks, with anywhere from a few to a few thousand fighters vying for titles and awards.

Knotts said even at smaller events there is almost always a tournament of some kind, whether it is for a championship or just for fun. "It's a lot of work," Knotts said, "but the more you practice, the better you are."

Fighting may be the most visible of the SCA's activities, but it is certainly not the only option. For those to whom hand-to-hand combat does not sound appealing, any type of

Herald: Generic term for the officers in charge of the development and registration of names and devices, and for making announcements at Court and events.

Hold: A cry meaning "Stop whatever you are doing and freeze in place until you see where the hazard is!" The basic use is in combat, but it has been extended to cover all forms of activity.

Knights Marshal: The officer in charge of armored combat training.

List: The field on which a tournament or combat activity is taking place.

Minister of Arts and Sciences: The officer who covers the interests involving arts, crafts and sciences activities and who helps members find sources of information and teachers.

Pavilion: A term used to refer to a medieval-style tent.

“It’s really comfortable. It involves big baggy pants, and it’s also feminine,”

Roxanne Sweney said about her Turkish garb. This fancy style of clothing from the 1400s was worn when visiting kings and queens. During this time period, Turkish people loved to wear “wild and tacky” patterns.



craft, hobby or activity that would have taken place between A.D. 600 and A.D. 1600 is fair game in SCA.

Occupations and diversions taught and learned in the SCA include singing, instrumental music, calligraphy, cooking, storytelling, medieval games, belly dancing, sewing, leather work, weaving—the options are nearly endless.

Sarah Kerschenske, senior in sociology, is Axed Root’s deputy minister of arts and sciences. Kerschenske got involved in SCA when she went with her roommates to an SCA “Sharing Day,” held the third Sunday of each month for the purpose of teaching and learning various arts and crafts.

She always had been involved in arts and music, and she said her roommates convinced her to try SCA by telling her the SCA already did all the things she liked to do. Kerschenske quotes her favorite activity as “a toss-up between sewing and singing,” but she brought

an unusual talent of her own to SCA.

“I’m the regional fire-breather. I breathe fire and eat fire,” she said. Though this is a skill she is not willing to teach or explain because of the safety issue, Kerschenske said her act is a big crowd-pleaser at events. “I usually do it in the list field, which is where they fight, in between fighting,” she said.

While the garb, the fighting and the arts may be what draw people into the SCA, most members say the family atmosphere is what keeps them coming back. “The emphasis is on fun and family,” Kerschenske said. “We have a lot of college students who are away from their homes and away from their families, so the community atmosphere is a big draw.”

Klinnert voiced appreciation for the helpful, giving attitude that is common throughout SCA. “What struck me when I first joined is that everybody is so willing to give you whatever you need. It was just overwhelming,” she said. Other members like the camaraderie

of the group.

“You’re never going to find another group of people like this,” said Mark Judisch, otherwise known as Magnus Anskegg. Judisch is a Des Moines firefighter and a member of the SCA. “You join the group, and you instantly have an army of best friends.”

At a large event or a small gathering of friends, SCA members seem to agree they share a spirit of non-conformity. “You have to be a little weird. You have to not mind people staring at you,” Hartmann said. Wilson explained further. “People in the SCA are not afraid to be different,” she said. “We go to Quik Trip in our garb.”

Kerschenske said the priority in the SCA is enjoyment, and all the activities are meant to be fun. She emphasized that SCA activities are not a reenactment, but only a re-creation of the atmosphere and the ideals of the Middle Ages. “It’s all of the clothes and none of the plague,” she said.

Period: The historical era used by the SCA as a base for its activities. Period is generally considered A.D. 600 to A.D. 1600.

Persona: The character assumed by an SCA member. This may involve anything from adopting a name to developing a full history for a person born and raised at some specific place and time in

the period covered by the SCA.

Rattan: The stem of a climbing palm. It is used for making weapons because its weight and handling properties

resemble steel, while its overall resilience and other properties permit it to be used with safety.

Seneschal: The chief administrative officer and legal representative of any

SCA group, who is generally responsible for coordinating the activities of the group’s other officers.

Tournament: A fighting competition.

—Adapted from SCA literature